Soviets Bar American's Exit

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Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Jan. 7—Alberta Skinner Stumpf, born 68 years ago in Rising Sun, Indiana, would like to visit America to see two old sisters before they die. But Mrs. Stumpf can't go home, because the Soviet Union claims her as a Soviet Citizen, and will not let her leave this country.

Quirks of geography, history and national politics seem to have cast Mrs. Stumpf as the victim of an existential tragedy. Whether she feels this way is unknown, but her story could have been lifted intact from a Kafka nightmare.

She came to Europe in 1929 as a young missionary, a graduate of the Moody Bible College in Chicago. After some years she married Eugene Stumpf, a Hungarian minister, and raised a family of five sons. before World War II, she kept regularly in touch with her five older sisters in the United States who had raised her after her mother died.

The sisters heard nothing from Mrs. Stumpf from 1939 to 1945. She reestablished contact with them after the war. She also sought to move her family to Budapest from their home in what is now the Soviet Ukraine, apparently intending to go on from Hungary to America. But the Iron Curtain fell between her and Budapest in 1946, and she never made it.

Citizenship Questoin

During 1946 and 1947, the American embassy in Moscow tried to persuade Soviet authorities to allow Mrs. Stumpf and her family to leave the Ukraine. According to a note in the embassy's files, the Soviet foreign ministry "never replied to the embassy's several inquiries concerning Mrs. Stumpf's status." During this same period Mrs. Stumpf—in Moscow's opinion—assumed Soviet citizenship, as did anyone trapper in an area which was added to the Soviet Union after the war.

Mrs. Stumpf lost contact with her family and U.S. authorities until 1955. She wrote that year that she had been in the hospital with turberculosis, but apparently recovered. Her sisters sought again to get her out of the Soviet Union, but to no avail.

In 1963 the sisters decided to bring Mrs. Stumpf home for a visit without her family. She agreed and began applying for permission to take such a trip. The sisters meanwhile sought help from the State Department.

Files in the case suggest that the sisters expected the State Department to produce Mrs. Stumpf for them, and that the department never adequately explained to them that only the Soviet Union could let her go home. The frustrated sisters even hired a lawyer to try to get action from the U.S. government. Their efforts continued for seven years.

Mrs. Stumpf obviously had her own frustrations with American officialdom. Almost every time her case was reactivated, a new U.S. consul had just arrived in Moscow. Some of them were less sympathetic and helpful than others.

Brief Permission

In October, 1970—Mrs. Stumpf has written—Soviet officials told her she had been granted permission for a visit to America. Then they quickly withdrew the permission. Reporting this turn of events to the Moscow embassy, she also acknowledged that her husband, an ordained minister, had been "working for 20 years as a manual laborer." But "he was never deported or convicted," she added, "and we have never taken any part whatsoever in politics."

In the last two years the embassy here has raised Mrs. Stumpf's case with Soviet officials on 12 different occasions. The United States even filed a formal diplomatic note on her behalf. U.S. diplomats say the foreign ministry in Moscow often seemed ready to help, but local authorities in the Ukraine continually refuse to grant her an exit visa. The embassy has cabled those local officials twice, but has never received an answer.

Embassy officials are at a loss to explain the Soviet attitude, which is generally more flexible, at least in cases of immediate families trying to reunite. (Ordinary citizens have almost no hope of traveling to the Western world.) "We don't know what they're afraid of," one U.S. diplomat said.

Meanwhile, three of Mrs. Stumpf's sisters have died. One of the remaining two, Edith S. Atkins of Altadena, Calif., who is 80, wrote the State Department last year:

"If she (her sister Mrs. Stumpf) doesn't get here almost immediately it will be too late. My sister and I are feeble and aged. Three sisters have recently gone . . ."